
Serving on a Panel

As a Patient Advocate who dedicates time to raising awareness about a particular disease or condition, you may be asked to be part of a panel discussion. Here are some essential tips to help you should you be asked to serve on a panel.

Being a good panelist is more than just knowing the subject, it's about:

1. Knowing how to answer questions;
2. When to insert yourself into the debate and
3. When to hold back.

There's nothing more irritating to both the audience and the moderator than someone who tries to dominate a debate through interruptions or by talking over everyone else on the panel. That ends up hurting your cause rather than benefitting it.

Know Your Panel

Most panel discussions are thoughtful, friendly discussions.

But once in a while you may be asked to be part of a panel where you are *the only person* talking about stem cell research. This could leave you the target of opposition—so it's a good idea to know what to expect

Questions to ask ahead of time:

1. What is the nature of the panel?
2. Who else will be on it?
3. Who is the primary audience?
4. What kinds of questions will I be asked?

If the panel organizer would rather withhold questions to keep things spontaneous, you can still ask for guidance—because the better prepared you are the more effective you will be.

Know the Other Panelists

Ask for a list of other panelists, and then do some digging. Social media tools—as well as search engines such as Google—can help you find out background information ahead of time so you know what to expect from them. You'll easily learn their backgrounds, their areas of interest or expertise and even perhaps their positions on subjects that may come up during the panel.

Tip: Making reference to books or articles they have written, or even pointing out you went to the same college can be a simple way of disarming a potential opponent.

Know Your Material

You are being asked to be part of this panel because you are thoughtful, engaged and knowledgeable, so make sure that's how you come across. Don't assume you know your material, go back over it several times before the panel so it's fresh in your mind.

Search Google to make sure you are up to date on the latest news. If you can talk about something that is in the news right now, it's much more effective than referencing 'old news.'

Dress Professionally

Small things can make a big difference. When you are on the panel people will be making judgments about you based on many factors, including what you wear. Dressing professionally takes away any distractions about your clothes and—most importantly—focuses attention on what you say.

Be Engaging

The audience want to be informed, they want to be engaged, but they also want to be entertained. So, the more you can give them all three, the more effective you will be. As you plan out what you want to say have the audience in mind. Avoid long, dry explanations that may lose their attention. Keep your remarks short, thoughtful, punchy and even humorous when appropriate. *Above all, don't be boring.*

Be Prepared

Don't wait until the last minute to think about what you are going to say. Plan out your opening remarks ahead of time.

Draw up a list of key points you want to make, write them down and rehearse them. This will give you a tight, well-thought out opening presentation, one that allows you to hit all the points you want without waffling or droning on.

When you rehearse your presentation say it out loud. There's a big difference between reading a presentation and delivering a speech.

Reading out loud lets you hear how you will sound and how it feels to you. Then, you can make changes so that the final presentation sounds natural, flows smoothly and is as effective as it can be.

Tip: Don't be afraid to ask someone you know and trust to let you rehearse it in front of them.

Tell Stories

Lectures are dull. Stories are engaging. When on the panel, start your statement with a story, such as something that happened to you that started you on the road to be a Patient Advocate. Stories are a vital tool to break down barriers between you and your audience. Think ahead of time how you can bring in stories that illustrate some of the points you want to make. Always relate the end of the story to the panel discussion to help the audience understand its relevance to them.

Remember the ABC's: Always Be Cool

Every once in a while someone on the panel will try to be controversial or provocative, or quite simply a jerk. Stay cool.

Don't jump in without having formulated a thoughtful response. In the heat of the moment you could end up saying something you might regret later or that alienates the audience.

Acknowledge the other panel member or members who are being provocative, agree that they have a right to their opinion even if you don't agree. Don't be confrontational or argumentative. Stay cool.

Tip: In the case of something such as the use of human embryonic stem cells in research, simply say that this is an area where you will have to agree to disagree, that you appreciate their stance but it's not one you share.

Don't Hog the Limelight

Remember that kid in high school who every time the teacher asked a question had their hand up saying "Oh, oh, oh, me, me, me?"

Don't be that person.

A panel discussion is an *exchange* of ideas. Don't try and dominate the debate. Even if you do really know more than everyone else, you won't do yourself or your cause any favors by trying to prove it. Be respectful of the other panel members, and the moderator and give them a chance to shine as well.

Stick to What You Know.

The conversation may cover a wide range of topics but you don't have to weigh in on all of them. Only talk about the things you really know about. If you volunteer opinions on other subjects that you are not as familiar with or knowledgeable about you may end up making some glaring mistakes and that will damage your credibility when talking about the things you are an expert in.

As Long as You Are On Stage, You Are ON.

Even when you are not speaking always remember to appear engaged. Don't start checking your email halfway through someone else's presentation, no matter how boring it may be. Don't roll your eyes if someone is saying something you disagree with.

Remember, this is all about how the audience perceives you, which is not just a matter of what you say, but also of how you act.

Tip: Always have a notepad and a pen handy so you can make notes during other people's presentations. It will make you look thoughtful.

Enjoy Yourself.

The audience came because they wanted to learn something. They want to be engaged and become informed. It's your job to make sure that happens.

The more fun you are having and the more engaged you are, the more likely they are to listen and remember what you had to say.

This also makes it more likely that you'll be asked to do more events, getting yet another opportunity to get your message out to a wider audience.

Source URL: <http://www.cirm.ca.gov/patients/patients-toolbox/serving-panel>